

- Sarah McConnell: The following program was made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: exploring the human endeavor.
- Thuy Dinh: We couldn't tell anyone. The neighbors, anyone. My grandfather said, "When the time come, I'm going to call home and I'm going to give you a code. And you would know what that means."
- Sarah McConnell: This is Thuy Dinh. She was 13 years old when the city of Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces in a surprise attack April 30th, 1975. 10 days before, Thuy's family got that call from her grandfather.
- Thuy Dinh: Each person get two pounds. That's it. We cannot leave with more luggage than that. We were shuttered to this compound that's part of the US army. And the next day, we landed in the Philippines Clark Airbase. And, it was in Guam when we found out that South Vietnam had fallen. From April 20th to May 27, we moved to three different places before we landed in Virginia. An entirely different culture. I'd never traveled outside of Vietnam before that. And then, within that one month, so many things change. I mean, I lost a country.
- Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, leaving the Vietnam War. By 1973, the US had been involved in Vietnam for more than two decades. President Richard Nixon was ramping up bomb raids, but the US still wasn't winning. In January, Nixon finally signed the Paris Peace Accords. A peace treaty to end US involvement. But the war between the North and South Vietnamese wasn't over. So, a new question emerged after the Paris Peace Accords: what what happened to Vietnam?
- Marc S: The Paris Accords allowed over a hundred thousand north Vietnamese soldiers to remain south of the 17th parallel at the signing of the peace.
- Sarah McConnell: What does that mean?
- Marc S: That means that there were over a hundred thousand North Vietnamese with their daggers pointed at Saigon and there was nothing short of resuming the war that the south Vietnamese could do to get them out.
- Sarah McConnell: This is Marc Selverstone. He's a Vietnam war expert and the assistant director for presidential studies at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs. He spent years working with the secret White House tapes of president John F Kennedy, Lyndon B Johnson and Richard M Nixon.
- Marc S: The Nixon administration wanted to leave the war with its honor intact, with its credibility intact, with a sense that the United States was still a powerful force for good and leader of those free nations. And as much as the administration tried to suggest that the south Vietnamese would be able to stand after the Americans left, most people recognize that that just wasn't the case. The South Vietnamese were essentially signing their own death warrant.

Sarah McConnell: He says, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger had no illusions about what the accord meant for Vietnam.

Marc S: So, there is this conversation in early August of 1972.

Sarah McConnell: August, 1972. This is months before the Peace Accord and years before the fall of Saigon.

Marc S: Kissinger says to Nixon, "Mr President, everything is coming together. You will be able to get out, you will have achieved your goals. And then by 1974 or so, when South Vietnam falls, people won't care."

Sarah McConnell: Do we have that tape?

Marc S: Yeah, we have that tape.

Tape: [inaudible 00:04:16] Mr President, the Vietnam will be a [inaudible 00:04:25]. If we [inaudible 00:04:25] and no one will give a damn.

Marc S: No one will give a damn.

Sarah McConnell: Where they sorrowful?

Marc S: There is a sense of resignation, but it was essential for Nixon and Kissinger to get the United States out. South Vietnam had become a distraction. The Cold War confrontation with the Soviets, the emerging recognition of the People's Republic of China. This is what mattered to the Nixon administration. Plaguing the bigger game in the cold war. And, Vietnam really needed to be taken off the table.

Sarah McConnell: Although US combat missions had ended with the Paris Peace Accords, some American personnel remained stationed in Saigon.

Peter Bondi: I played tennis and had no fear for my wellbeing. Literally four weeks before I had to be evacuated from Saigon.

Sarah McConnell: This is retired admiral Peter Bondi. He was stationed in Saigon.

Peter Bondi: I was going for a one year tour duty. I was supposed to be there for a year.

Sarah McConnell: Can you think even the higher ups and America fully thought you'd get your year?

Peter Bondi: I'll tell you one person who did think that was the ambassador to Vietnam from United States, Graham Martin.

Marc S: Ambassador Graham Martin, who refuse to believe that Saigon really was going to fall.

Sarah McConnell: This is Mark Silverstein again.

Marc S: He was being told that in no uncertain terms by his age in Saigon, but he himself had lost a son in the fighting. His only son and he refused to give in to the notion, the defeatist notion that all was lost.

Sarah McConnell: Saigon fell April 30th, 1975. What had been happening leading up to the overrunning of Saigon by the north?

Marc S: A series of developments, not the least of which was Watergate. And then fast forwarding to Nixon's resignation in August of 1974. And then, congress deciding to continue to winnow down on the funding to south Vietnam. These combined with poor showing of the South Vietnamese army led the north to mount larger operations probing, would the United States come back in if south Vietnam's viability was really threatened?

Sarah McConnell: Did we?

Marc S: No.

Peter Bondi: The war was approaching Saigon. I did not know that through our sources of information. I knew that, because you could begin to hear the guns in the distance.

Sarah McConnell: No Way.

Peter Bondi: Yes. The flow of information was awful. Our principal source of information until the last month was armed forces radio. And, I'd hear things about that were going on in south Vietnam. Had no idea they were going on. You heard the guns in the distance and you knew trouble was coming.

Marc S: The North Vietnamese were overrunning province after province. From the north to the south.

Peter Bondi: It just moved like lightning moves on a storm at night and they just kept rolling up one city after another. The South Vietnamese were disillusioned. They never dreamed that this would happen. They had the civilians; they were leaving the city at the same time. Jam the highway, complete gridlock. I mean they were like shooting ducks. The north Vietnamese for the very first time, probably said to themselves, "My Gosh, we've got a chance on taking Saigon."

Sarah McConnell: So, as the north with closing it on Saigon and only days remained before Saigon itself fell, was the Pentagon, was the White House, were other saying, "Get those people out of there."

Marc S: Only at the very end did the White House recognize and give the signal that the final evacuation had to take place. No one could have imagined that the fifth largest army in the world would disintegrate as quickly as it did. These soldiers were shedding their uniforms, dropping their boots, trying to blend in with the tens and really hundreds of thousands of south Vietnamese trying to get to Saigon to figure out a way how to get out of the country. Whether by air or by sea.

Sarah McConnell: So, the people of South Vietnam were desperate to get out of there. But how? Huge lines formed at the American embassy. Many were hoping, pleading for the Americans to help them escape.

Peter Bondi: The embassy was so overwhelmed by the people that they set up a new office out by the airport. There was an airplane that came in every 30 minutes and we loaded. Oh, I guess a hundred or 150 Vietnamese on that plane. And, we did that during the daylight. Each day, seven days a week.

Sarah McConnell: Lieu Nguyen, a 10 year old girl was one of the thousands rushing to get out. In 2015, she was interviewed as part of an oral history project by Virginia Tech's masters in planning program. Her father had arranged for his wife and eight children to fly out on April 29th.

Lieu Nguyen: But, my dad drove off the side of some rice patties and we saw about 20 helicopters that were there. So he pulled over. He thought that, that's where we were supposed to me. And when he come to each of the pilot of each of those helicopter and said the password, they did not know what he was talking about.

Sarah McConnell: They spend hours searching for the right one and they missed it, but that didn't stop them.

Lieu Nguyen: My younger brother, he is handicapped, so it was tough for us to move around and we really couldn't move around very quickly. We were scrambling to figure out ways to get out of Vietnam.

Sarah McConnell: There was a naval base nearby and they figured it was a good bet for transportation out. It took many hours in a dangerous effort to get their car through the gates closing in on them. But Lou and her family made it through inside the gates. They gathered next to a flagpole for the night.

Lieu Nguyen: And, it was nice air breeze. It was like, "Ah, great, perfect spot." We had instant noodles for dinner that night and then we went to sleep. Then by midnight the naval base got bombed. We were actually went from bomb shelter to bomb shelter in that naval base, that whole night.

Sarah McConnell: The naval base was evacuated and the family was on their own again. The next morning they wound up with three other families on a small fishing boat that nearly sank. Passing ships were all too full to save them. Finally, a tugboat took them to a small city south of Saigon.

Lieu Nguyen: By the time that we got to that closest city, that's already the 30th. By then Saigon had already taken over because we got there until early afternoon, so Saigon had already been taken over at 10.00.

Sarah McConnell: Lou and her family had nearly died twice in less than 36 hours and they hadn't even left Vietnam yet.

Lieu Nguyen: We were tired, exhausted, no food. And so my mother decided to have a vote, very democratic right? She said, let's vote. We've been on the road now for 36 hours. Who wants to go home and who wanted to stay? And my dad said, "I understand that communist is bad, but they probably just going to take me to go to some concentration camp where they'll kill me. And that's okay. But, I don't want to see the kids who have to suffer." He voted to go home and my mother bought herself, decided that, "No, we're going to be beggars in America, but we're going. We're not going back. We're not going to live with the communism.

Sarah McConnell: Her family negotiated their way onto a ship. Lou remember seeing flares go up in the city along with the North Vietnamese flag. The takeover was official. The ship took off.

Lieu Nguyen: There was supposed to be some steel barrier out in the Pacific Ocean. And if we go through it, they said that most likely the ship is going to blow up and either you crash and we all die, or you crash into it and we're able to break that steel barrier and then we'll be able to be free. So, the captain decided that they're just going to go right through it. And so everybody was so scared praying. All of a sudden we heard this loud, loud, loud noise. And then just dead silent and then everybody just clapped. Oh my God, we made it through that barrier. So that's how we got out. That's how we got out in the Pacific Ocean.

Sarah McConnell: Their voyage was far from over. From that boat, they moved to a barge. Her mother fell into the water, but was later rescued. Later, her brother passed out, likely from dehydration and seasickness.

Lieu Nguyen: Then my mother was very driven now that we have to get into a ship to get him help. So there was an aircraft carrier came through, I forgot which one it was.

Sarah McConnell: Out in the middle of the sea, the only way to get on this aircraft carrier was by climbing a rope ladder. After many hours, they all made it on. But, Lou's father couldn't climb the hanging ladder with her brother and all their belongings. He'd have to leave something behind. They'd been traveling with gold. So, he grabbed that bag and left the rest.

Lieu Nguyen: When we United, my mother finally settled down and count all the bags. were is the gold bag? My dad said, "It's that one." She said, "That's not the gold bag."

Sarah McConnell: And she was right. It wasn't the bag of gold. That had been left back on the barge. What was inside this bag? Cans of condensed milk.

Lieu Nguyen: That bag that contained the condensed milk, actually is what saved us, because on the aircraft carrier there wasn't enough food for everybody. I mean, I don't know. They must have had like thousands of people on there. Each day they gave us a plate of rice. That's not enough for 10 of us.

Sarah McConnell: Lou's Mother also brought a carton of cigarettes with her. And, she bartered with the American soldiers; one pack for a bag of instant noodles.

Lieu Nguyen: And so that's what got us through the five days on the aircraft carrier.

Sarah McConnell: The carrier finally landed safely in the Philippines where many refugees stayed, but Lou's family was determined to push on to the United States where they'd ultimately settled in northern Virginia, outside Washington DC.

Lieu Nguyen: Sometimes looking back, I just thought, Gosh, why? We were so lucky that we survived that versus the other people around us. And, it was just amazing how we survived that.

Sarah McConnell: Lou's story is harrowing but not uncommon. Thousands of Vietnamese people on boats floated out to sea sometimes never finding a port or the fuel they need, or another ship to take them to safety. Americans too were scrambling to get out of Saigon. Pete Bondi remembers wondering how he would escape.

Peter Bondi: No one said gee. There's talk about us leaving or anything, our job was to get the south Vietnamese out. Needless to say, Sarah, at one point when you do that enough, you begin to save yourself. He gets, "Am I going to be one of those people on a plane?"

Sarah McConnell: By the morning of April 30th, the airport and surrounding roads became so dangerous that Pete couldn't even make it to a plane to escape. So, a plan was developed to run helicopters in an out dropping people off on ships.

Peter Bondi: Exactly. And so I, I went into a helicopter, was probably several other American civilians. I was the only military and then the rest were south Vietnamese.

Sarah McConnell: Pete Bondi was one of the last American servicemen to leave Vietnam.

Peter Bondi: I did not even know where we were going. I just knew we were leaving Saigan.

Speaker 7: There were more than 80 helicopters. Shuttling people out to the carriers.

- Speaker 8: Helicopters, transports, even fighter bombers, and the name was whirling merry-go-round over the city... Waiting helicopter. Although it seemed much longer, it took only two or three minutes to load the helicopters and then it was farewell to Vietnam.
- Speaker 7: But because there wasn't room to store their helicopters, the Vietnamese were forced to ditch their aircraft at seas.
- Peter Bondi: We are stacked up there, four or five at a time waiting to land. So, we would ship anything off. It was worth saving and push it over the side.
- Sarah McConnell: Captain Paul Jacobs who's helping guide helicopters like the one Pete bond he was on to his aircraft carrier, the USS Kirk.
- Peter Bondi: The one I was really dangerous was the big CH47.
- Sarah McConnell: The CH47 was too big to land on board.
- Peter Bondi: Right? If he tried to land on Kirk slide deck, he would have impacted the ship and killed a lot of people.
- Sarah McConnell: How frightened did they seem to be?
- Peter Bondi: Oh, they were scared to death. If they hadn't found us, they would have... If they had a crash at sea, they would have probably lost majority of the people.
- Sarah McConnell: So, he came out... Here was a giant helicopter hovering over you. What did y'all do?
- Peter Bondi: I said, "Hey, get under there and see if we can catch them when they come out.
- Sarah McConnell: What were they saying to you?
- Peter Bondi: There's no communication because of noise is so bad. So we assumed they were going to jump. We all knew that, but we never expected the first one to be a baby. One year old baby.
- Sarah McConnell: The South Vietnamese pilot's wife dropped her one year old baby out of the helicopter hoping the sailors below would catch him. They did.
- Peter Bondi: We caught them all. I think the only casualty we had was somebody who had a sprained ankle.
- Sarah McConnell: The guys on deck caught at least 15 people dropping 20 to 30 feet from that helicopter.

- Peter Bondi: We took 17 helicopters and about 140 people.
- Sarah McConnell: Captain Paul Jacobs was then ordered back to Vietnam just after the fall of Saigon to rescue the Vietnamese navy from sudden death. He and his crew went on to save thousands of people by carrying them on board and guiding or towing their boats to the Philippines.
- Peter Bondi: We went back to see what we could do. If I shunt them back, they would all been dead. They'd all killed them all. It was the most horrible situation I've ever seen in my lifetime. That was the largest humanitarian effort ever conducted by United States Navy.
- Speaker 8: Saigon, April the 30th, eight o'clock the last American helicopter prepares to lift off the last of the evacuees, schools of people still crowded onto the embassy roof in the vain hope of rescue.
- Speaker 7: Do you think the last ones have gone?
- Speaker 8: I think they are all gone. I think these people up here are committing suicide thing up here, but what can you do.
- Marc S: Images of those last helicopters leaving Saigon with Americans and South Vietnamese aboard was a sad moment.
- Sarah McConnell: Mark Silverstein, again.
- Marc S: This is a really sad chapter in American history. Regardless of how one feels about the propriety of the war, the United States had failed in its effort to support a non communist alternative in south Vietnam. It was not a failure on the part of those Americans who fought there. It was a policy failure. It was a failure of leadership. It was a failure of assessing global conditions. It was a failure of understanding the nature of communism and nationalism in Southeast Asia. It was a failure of understanding the limits of American power.
- Marc S: As a result of those failures, millions of people lost their lives. We had a different understanding of leadership, of truth. We could never look on politicians again and believe what they were telling us. Vietnam changed so much of the fabric of Americans' lives. I think we're still trying to come to grips with the impact of the American adventure in Vietnam.
- Sarah McConnell: While Americans began to deal with the aftermath of the war at home, the South Vietnamese began to deal with their new reality.
- Phuong Nguyen: My uncle got the news from the radio saying that the south has surrendered.
- Sarah McConnell: That Fun Weng. He was 10 years old, the morning Saigon fell.

- Phuong Nguyen: I remember my aunt sitting right next to us and said, "Well, you know, the communist now won, but, uh, at least the Vietnamese. So, I don't think there would be that bad." That's what she said.
- Sarah McConnell: As the North Vietnamese tanks rolled in, 10 year old Fun took advice from neighbors. He ran outside smiling and handed out noodles to show his support for the North Vietnamese soldiers. He was afraid they'd shoot him otherwise. It wasn't long after when some relatives from the north came to visit.
- Phuong Nguyen: Because they heard the news of the American and the southern Vietnamese was so brutal to us. So, that's why they rush over and trying to rescue us.
- Sarah McConnell: And they brought food?
- Phuong Nguyen: Yes. And I remember one of my relative, she had rice in her bag. And, when she saw our hao, she threw it away. She would show not shame. Feeling like she was being cheated, because he saw how we lived. They thought we were poor. We would... poor, that's what they thought.
- Sarah McConnell: So why had they thought that you were being mistreated by the South Vietnamese in the US?
- Phuong Nguyen: All these propaganda farm north Vietnam, there was no outside media coming in. So, they describe our lives, a lot of hardship. Mistreatment, everything they got was one sided.
- Sarah McConnell: For the next four years, Fun and his family stayed in Saigon under communist rule. And his new life-
- Phuong Nguyen: Had changed dramatically.
- Sarah McConnell: Loudspeakers were set up across the city and mass early morning exercises were enforced by law. As were short haircuts for boys like Fun. Books were burned and even the way math was taught, took on a new format.
- Phuong Nguyen: It has a problem like in the morning, you kill five American, you know, and then in the afternoon you kill four more. So, how many you killed today? That's your math problem. That's night. And, I remember the books were like that. So, anti-American.
- Sarah McConnell: But, Fun's family resisted the on slaughter of media depicting Americans and South Vietnam as evil. Fun's mother taught him not to give in, but to pretend. To put on a happy face and follow the rules. Their new leader, Ho Chi Minh became Uncle Ho.

- Phuong Nguyen: And we were forced to write essay that we love uncle Ho. And we listened to the rules that taught us and we would kiss... Pardon my language, but kiss his ass, you know, all the times. Just try to pretend, and then we would go behind them and do anti government stuff.
- Sarah McConnell: As time went on, Fun's mother's fears about his future grew. So, she devised a plan for him to escape. And one day in April of 1979 the 14 year old boy boarded a boat. No one, including the captain, knew exactly where they'd end up. Fun remembers having just enough room to sit, but not to lie down.
- Phuong Nguyen: Our boat got ransacked by the pilot 17 Times.
- Sarah McConnell: Huh! How many days were you at sea?
- Phuong Nguyen: I think maybe 20 days. I saw people starting to hang out with the watchers, the jewelry and put it in that bucket. And I remember, they took some of the young ladies from my boat over to their boat. They jump on and just drag them. One attacks after another, ransacking our boats and we got used it.
- Sarah McConnell: After almost three weeks at sea, Fun's boat landed in Malaysia where they quickly destroyed the engine to keep police from forcing them back out onto the water. He spent the next nine months in a refugee camp before he was allowed to join cousins and southern California where he lives today. Fun describes the experience of his arrival in the US in 1980.
- Phuong Nguyen: One of the person welcoming Vietnamese coming over, he came out, he said, "Welcome to San Francisco. This is a place where the land is so golden that you plant an antenna, will become a tree." That, I remember that distinctively. And, I have the first best food in my life for a long, long time. It was Kentucky Fried Chicken. Tastes so good. I mean it was the utmost happiest feeling that you actually inhabit as you got into America.
- Sarah McConnell: From 1975 until the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people came to the United States in a series of waves. First, those who evacuated at the fall of Saigon and then the boat people like Fun. And later, groups including former political prisoners and the children of American servicemen. As a result, we have a Vietnamese American population today of about 2 million people. Many, many Vietnamese came here. Do you think America is stronger for having opened it's arms to this particular population?
- Peter Bondi: Sarah, I can't answer that question without dwelling on what's happening presently, and I won't get into the politics of it, but I think that America has progressed from its inception, from its immigrants. And, the South Vietnamese were the best and the brightest as indicated by their willingness to do whatever it took to progress and do well in the US, make themselves upstanding American citizens. I think the same would be true, whoever they are, that the US will be better for it if we do it intelligently.

- Sarah McConnell: This is with good reason. We'll be right back...
- Sarah McConnell: After the fall of Saigon, thousands of Vietnamese people fled the new communist rule. They landed in refugee camps and places like Malaysia, and Thailand. Eventually many of them made it to the United States.
- Phuong Nguyen: There were approximately five waves of refugees that came between 1975 and through the 1990s.
- Sarah McConnell: This is Phuong Nguyen.
- Phuong Nguyen: I'm an assistant professor at California State University, Monterey Bay. I recently published my first book called *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*.
- Sarah McConnell: In those decades, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees came to America. The earlier arrivals, we're intentionally spread out all over the country.
- Phuong Nguyen: It was a very old school definition of assimilation.
- Sarah McConnell: The idea was that they needed to be in English only communities so they could learn the language faster.
- Phuong Nguyen: Because, I assumed that, if you don't learn to speak English, not only will you not be able to find a good job, not be able to succeed in school, but you're going to almost justify the discrimination that you face.
- Sarah McConnell: The government relied heavily on churches and religious organizations to help with three settlement. Religious organizations handled about 75% of the case loads in 1975.
- Phuong Nguyen: Sponsors would act as ready made communities for the refugees. When Thuy Dinh came to the US, her family was sponsored by the blessed sacrament church in Alexandria, Virginia.
- Thuy Dinh: And, they set up ESL class for us so we wouldn't be like; it feels so lost. And when school started.
- Sarah McConnell: The blessed sacrament church had the sponsorship thing done pat. Different people were assigned roles to help with every little aspect of resettlement.
- Thuy Dinh: One would take us to concerts and one would take us through the store. One would take us to doctor's appointments, so each of that would just do one thing.

- Sarah McConnell: Overall, adjustment for Thuy Dinh and her family went well. But still, they got some unexpected reactions from the church families who are helping them.
- Thuy Dinh: They had this impression that all Vietnamese grew up or live in the jungle and that we didn't know a lot about modern life.
- Sarah McConnell: Take driving. For example, Thuy's father immediately wanted to get his driver's license so he could start working.
- Thuy Dinh: The church member were very surprised and said, "You drove? I thought like everyone like a road bicycle." And he said, "No, I had a car." I would tell us how you put a water, the ice tray and how you freeze it and might have to say, "Yeah, we have ice trays."
- Sarah McConnell: Other refugees didn't just space misunderstandings. Not all the sponsors had good intentions, which meant some of the new Americans suffered.
- Thuy Dinh: They were treated like servants and mate to do like chores on farms and it was like indentured servitude.
- Tan Tien: There were letters coming from people saying, I'm looking for a wife. There were people who were looking for a cheap labor and they thought that they could find it with these refugees.
- Sarah McConnell: This is Tan Tien. she's the daughter of refugees and grew up in Olympia, Washington.
- Tan Tien: I have friends who grew up in very secluded areas and their parents just... they kind of left Vietnam behind them, but they were expected to just basically move on and become as American as possible.
- Sarah McConnell: But all across the country, other refugees are finding that becoming American didn't have to mean leaving Vietnam behind.
- Tan Tien: Eventually we learned to congregate anyway and create communities.
- Sarah McConnell: Despite the effort to spread the refugees out, the new Vietnamese Americans were finding each other and instead of hurting their chances at success is helped.
- Phuong Nguyen: People who were normal professionals in the marketplace, but who spoke Vietnamese now lived among the critical mass of people who would go exclusively to them to buy insurance. For example.
- Sarah McConnell: This is Fun Weng again.

Phuong Nguyen: People who wanted to have careers as singers are entertainers now had a critical mass of people who could attend their shows. People did migrate, they did learn to live around each other, and actually they wound up succeeding economically, because of ethnic community, not in spite of it.

Sarah McConnell: In the Clarendon neighborhood of Arlington, Virginia, a little Saigon grew and there were all sorts of services owned and operated and catering to the Vietnamese population. A restaurant, a Taylor an accountant, Photoshop. Tui Dian, his had settled in northern Virginia, shares what it was like.

Thuy Dinh: There was one store, it's called Saigon market, and that's where we went and got our fish sauce and all the spices, the things that we need it to cook.

Sarah McConnell: One of the major adjustments to American Life and connection to their homeland was food. Tui spent time in a refugee camp before moving to Virginia and she remembers the US servicemen trying very hard to make them feel at home.

Thuy Dinh: So they tried to make rice, but the only rice I knew how to make with uncle Ben and they could never make it right. And one of the service, a man behind the counter said, "Is it good today?" And were like, "No." And, he was very disappointed. So, it would go on for weeks and one day I didn't know, he got it right. So not quite, but we didn't want him to know, disappoint him. So, "Yeah, it's great today." They made him really happy.

Sarah McConnell: They couldn't get rice quite like home until Vietnamese shops began to open. Lou Wen's family escaped Vietnam in 1975 and opened a grocery store in Virginia the next year. they banked on the idea of catering to the burgeoning Vietnamese community.

Lieu Nguyen: And also, that would create job for both of my parents, they'd be working there and the kids, I was 10 at the time, begging beans and vegetables or whatever, name it.

Sarah McConnell: As the Little Saigon neighborhood in Virginia built up, carrying these seemingly small provisions, rice herbs, fish sauce, made a real difference.

Thuy Dinh: I mean now you go to whole food. Even the safe way, you can find like a basil or certain herbs. Back in 1975 even those herbs, you cannot find it at the local store. Things that you would find fairly common today.

Lieu Nguyen: In the morning when we get there at eight 30 there's already a line of people waiting from other states coming in like North Carolina, people from Florida would drive up and they would be vans and station wagons and they would buy for everybody in their town for like a month.

Tuo Doh: You know, there's a coffee shop that is selling coffee with the condensed milk.  
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- Sarah McConnell: This is Tuo Doh. He came to Virginia in 1980 from a refugee camp in Thailand.
- Tuo Doh: My family, my wife and the two boys still, it'd be another [inaudible 00:34:51]. So, I went to a little Saigon and then if you sit there and you listened to the Vietnamese music and drink the coffee, you will feel like you're back in Saigon again. If you close your eye.
- Sarah McConnell: The story of Vietnamese resettlement in America is largely a success story. It was successful, because there was a complex web of assistance. Refugees got help from well meaning sponsors. They found comfort and support and ethnic enclaves and they were lifted by government programs.
- Fun Doh Weng: I got through the welfare program, I would see food stamps and when it was in college, because I was poor, my mom was poor, I got financial aid.
- Sarah McConnell: This is Fun Doh Weng. He escaped Vietnam and came to the US in 1980 as a teenager. Fun settled in southern California, went to college and later became an attorney. But, not before serving in the US army.
- Fun Doh Weng: I just feel like it is a civic duty that you have to do it. The government helped me in every way they could. I mean without those assistant and then without the help of this great country helping me and people embracing us as I wouldn't be where I am today. And I told my kids that this country has given me so much. My children a little bit harder to teach them, but I tried to remind them that.
- Sarah McConnell: Fun says it's tough raising his children to have the same appreciation for America that he has. There's a whole population of Vietnamese Americans who've grown up only knowing America as home. And, they've had the balance being both Vietnamese and American. Tan Tien is one of those people.
- Tan Tien: So I lived, like a double life growing up like so many other people of Color, immigrants, refugees way, whoever. Right? I was really good at code switching, so it's like at school and speak English be Super Americanized. I'd go home, immediately, speak Vietnamese to my parents, eat Vietnamese food.
- Sarah McConnell: Her parents sent her to a special school Friday nights to learn Vietnamese language and culture. Now she's grateful. But, at the time she hated it.
- Tan Tien: Like that was probably the most Vietnamese thing about me, during those years, because I really... my real desire was that I just wanted to blend in with my friends at school.
- Sarah McConnell: As an adult now, Tan say she's on a never ending quest to understand what it means to be Vietnamese American. And she spends a lot of time asking her parents about their experiences and her heritage.

Fun Doh Weng: There's a hunger among young people for Vietnamese American history, because there is this problematic silence that's still predominates in the Vietnamese American community. My family, they almost never talked about Vietnam. My father didn't want to ever think about that his mom would die one day and he wouldn't be able to see her and say one last goodbye. If refugees associated communism with oppression than they occur associate to freedom in the United States with depression. Because of the loneliness and, the lack of culture and company that came along with it. The circumstances for that generation of people who actually remember what it was like to leave the country are not conducive to being able to do anything but express gratitude. Theoretically, that's how we kind of think of charity how we often think of rescue that it kind of introduces a debt that unfortunately can never be paid back.

Tan Tien: My parents knew they were very lucky. And part of my parents giving back to America was making sure that their children did well in school and we're successful when we graduated and that we're self sufficient.

Fun Doh Weng: The way I put it is that perfection was the price of rescue.

Tan Tien: I don't even think anybody had to tell them, you better be perfect Americans. It was this pressure that I think people of that generation took on themselves, but it has come at a cost.

Fun Doh Weng: On the one hand they're being told, "You're Americans, you're free now, things are better." And, from an American's perspective it's like that's absolutely true. What do they have to worry about now. From another perspective, just because their individual lives are safer and more secure, they have to still think about friends and relatives who need medicines or financial support.

Fun Doh Weng: One lady who I interviewed talk very briefly about her father being thrown in a reeducation camp and not ever been able to make it out. She had a pause a few times, even though we were 30 years removed from this. So their worries haven't gone away and they really don't have a space to really be able to talk about those stresses and worries. And, silence was their answer.

Sarah McConnell: It turns out one way to break the silence was music.

Speaker 14: [foreign language 00:39:41].

Sarah McConnell: Fun Doh Weng told me that Vietnamese music played a role in community building during the nine months he spent in a refugee camp.

Fun Doh Weng: We sing songs all the time. Traditional Vietnamese Music Star people are singing in the camp and then you listen to it, you start enjoying it.

Speaker 14: [foreign language 00:40:04].

- Sarah McConnell: And, Fun Doh Weng discovered that many refugees created their own new music as well.
- Fun Doh Weng: They had composed songs which are considered refugee songs. And these songs were very inspiring, because not only were they ways for Vietnamese to finally break the silence, but to realize that you know, their story was not just their story, it was everybody else's story.
- Speaker 14: [foreign language 00:40:38].
- Lieu Nguyen: And, there's a song called [foreign language 00:40:41], which is a gift from my homeland and it's this song about leaving the homeland and having to like save your pennies so that you can send medicine and send cloth home to your impoverished families back in Vietnam.
- Speaker 14: [foreign language 00:41:01].
- Lieu Nguyen: My mom is like, "Oh." Like people would sing that song and camp, you know, and everybody would cry, it united them.
- Speaker 14: The songs did a great deal to narrate the social history of Vietnamese at that time.
- Fun Doh Weng: I grew up in a household hearing these songs about life before the war, hearing songs that were popular among the military. That is the soundtrack of my childhood and I didn't always like it. I used to think like, this is cheesy. Give me some Debbie Gibson and new kids on the block, but so many Vietnamese songs have just really withstood the test of time and I am grateful, because they tell stories that in a lot of ways my parents couldn't tell us themselves.
- Speaker 14: [foreign language 00:41:55].
- Lieu Nguyen: I think music, it's the critical thread that connects us to our past. It's the thing that survived the war.
- Sarah McConnell: What is your generation or babies when they came here? Think about the war and the US involvement now from Lo these many decades later.
- Fun Doh Weng: My generation, especially those who are raised and taught in the United States initially and for the most part adopt a mainstream American perspective on it, which is that, communism never posed a significant threat to American society.
- Lieu Nguyen: Unfortunately for me as this like privileged kid who grew up in America and is like, war is over and like, so what if there are communists amount us. But, for like people like my parents and their generation, it is a real fear that is born out of real experiences. So, I don't want to diminish that pain that they feel.

Marc S: Vietnamese Americans, people of my generation who have no memory of communism, have no memory of escape. Their concerns are mostly with the present. Naturally and understandably, they come back butting heads with their parents.

Lieu Nguyen: It is very nuanced. You know, it's not black and white, but generally you have an older generation who feel a connection to the Republican party, because it was known for funding the military and for being very anticommunist and they fell in love with President Reagan's rhetoric throughout the 80s. And, yet you have a younger generation and a lot of them support progressives and Democrats and socialists. And it's this weird full circle thing sometimes where I'm like, "Oh my God, is this our parents freaking out?" It's a weird debate I think going on like within our community.

Sarah McConnell: Kim Delavat is part of this next generation who grew up in the US, but her experiences as an American and connecting to her Vietnamese roots are very different.

Kim D: I was born and Saigon, Vietnam, my name is Fang Kimfong.

Sarah McConnell: Kim left Vietnam by plane with her 10 year old brother on April 25th, 1975.

Kim D: I was a toddler when we fled.

Sarah McConnell: But, her mother missed the flight.

Kim D: She was stranded and stuck. She never had the chance to say goodbye to us.

Sarah McConnell: We found Kim's story in a collection of oral histories in the Texas Tech University, Vietnam Archive. The audio is a little rough, because she was interviewed by phone. She's talking to oral historian Jason Stewart back in 2010. Sometimes you can hear him breathing when she talks.

Kim D: Thank you Jason and thank you for letting me share my story today.

Jason: Sure.

Sarah McConnell: Kim was adopted by a white family in Florida. She talks about going to the beach after church every Sunday and generally enjoying her all American life, but she always felt different.

Kim D: When I was asked, just the simple question, where were you born? I would just, feeling as a Haiti, I couldn't say, "Oh, I was born at sacred heart hospital and I was seven pounds." I was different and I was born in Vietnam and I didn't know where that place was. It really wasn't until I was a junior in college that I began

to feel a whole in my identity. My boyfriend, bought two tickets for The Miss Saigon play about a young Vietnamese mother name Ken.

Speaker 14: You who I cradled in my arms.

Kim D: And she sent her child to a new life in America.

Speaker 14: Asking as little as you can.

Kim D: And, she never sees them again. As the play was unfolding, I could see that my life was literary mirrored.

Speaker 14: You know I give my life for you.

Kim D: So, I got very emotional. I didn't realize that a play could have that impact. And, as soon as we left, I told Peter, my boyfriend, I need to go find my roots, I need to find out where I was born. I'm ready to go back.

Sarah McConnell: Kim and Peter arrived in Ho Chi Minh City formally Saigon in 1994. They carried with them a note written in Vietnamese and a rudimentary map, which her cousin drew from memory.

Kim D: I was looking at this map that my cousin had drawn, and we were following it to the T. It was amazing how nothing had changed after 20 years.

Sarah McConnell: After a long trip, they arrived at a home in the Mekong Delta and Kim knocked on the door. A man answered, she handed him the note and he motioned for her to follow him down the street.

Kim D: I don't speak Vietnamese. So, I really was just following this stranger and we came to another house and the woman in the doorway, she read the note and he looked at me and immediately said, "Fong." I hadn't heard that name since I was a toddler. And she immediately started to cry and she woke up a little man on on a bed and she kept saying, Fong. And, she showed him the letter and he started crying. And, I'm like, "What's happening? What's happening?" In my mind? Because I was just really shocked.

Kim D: My uncle pulled out a stack of pictures and paraphernalia that he had saved for 20 years. I saw a young picture of my mother I'd never seen before. I thought baby pictures that I had never seen before of myself. He pulled up young pictures of my brother and he looked exactly the same. That's when it resonated with me. I realized that I was home. So, I'm just knocking on the door, my life has forever changed. It was a homecoming that I thought I would never have, but was so blessed to have been given my family back.

- Sarah McConnell: Kim learned. Her Mother did manage to escape about five years after missing that plane, but she died of a heart attack the day before she was scheduled to leave the refugee camp.
- Fun Doh Weng: The government of Vietnam for a while was talking about refugees as though we had it easy.
- Sarah McConnell: This is researcher and author Fun Doh Weng again.
- Fun Doh Weng: They act like it was really simple to get on a boat and leave the country and just simply go to the United States and enjoy a middle class life. Half of us died and I think that explains to a certain extent why refugees expressed this constant gratitude about being in the United States, because they have this sense of guilt and fought good fortune. They were able to make it that far.
- Sarah McConnell: Today, Americans are debating new refugee seekers and that debate is playing out in Vietnamese American communities. When news broke that families are being separated at the Mexican American border, Tan was surprised that her father saw it as a rational way to manage the process.
- Tan Tien: You know, I just said, dad, I feel like I have to remind you. When you escaped Vietnam illegally and you landed on the shores of Malaysia and the Malaysians didn't want the refugees, you ended up in a refugee camp and you were in the process of seeking asylum. How would you have felt if they had taken Weng, my older sister. How would you have felt if they had taken her away from you? And, I literally watched his face change. Well, all of a sudden he could empathize and he actually was like, "Oh, okay." And, it became more real for him what was going on at the border. I hope that the Vietnamese are not the last to have benefited from that American sense of generosity and opportunity.
- Sarah McConnell: This is the fourth and final episode in our special series on the Vietnam War. This program was made possible in part by a major grant from the national endowment for the humanities. Exploring The Human Endeavor. Support for with good reason. Also comes from the law firm of McGuire Woods and from the University of Virginia health system. Using advanced cardiac imaging to better diagnose conditions before they become serious health issues. UVAhealth.com. Interviews with Tui Dean, Duo Doh and Lou Weng, were provided by the center for local history at Arlington Public Library and are part of an ongoing project by Virginia Tech's urban and regional planning professor Elizabeth Morton.
- Sarah McConnell: Special thanks this week to David Berenger, director of Virginia humanities grants and community programs to Kelly Cramer from Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center in Archive and the KAZU radio from California State University, Monterey Bay. Some of our music this week came from blue dot sessions. With good reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia humanities. Our production team is Alison Quants, Elliot Majerczyk, Kelly Libby, Cassa Dea, and

This transcript was exported on Jul 25, 2019 - view latest version [here](#).

Alyson Byrne. Jeannie Pailin handles listener services for the podcast, go to [withgoodreasonradio.org](http://withgoodreasonradio.org). I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.